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Politics in Vietnam

Splintering of Parties Makes Effective Leadership Difficult

By Robert Keatley

HUE, South Vietnam—Across the languid Perfume River from Hue University lies the abandoned Imperial City of former Vietnamese kings. Its Nineteenth Century stone walls and gilded temples are modeled after those of Peking, for leaders then admired things Chinese.

In a drab science classroom of this university, officials of South Vietnam's newest political organization—the People's Revolutionary Force—met last month to draft their national policies. Their severest critics claim they also find inspiration in Peking, though of more modern vintage.

This charge of Communist influence is never substantiated but is often made and widely believed. And though apparently not true, such distrust is typical of Vietnamese politics these days as leaders try to form a viable government capable of withstanding Communist onslaught. Intrigue, cynicism, suspicion and honest incompetence mark efforts to create an effective civilian administration to succeed that of recently resigned General Nguyen Khanh.

Unfortunately, these efforts will decide whether or not the United States can ever blunt the Vietcong attempt to seize power in South Vietnam. Unless a stable government effectively rules the one-third of the nation not yet Communist-dominated, the U.S. will be reluctant to make any dramatic moves against North Vietnamese sources of supplies and personnel. It fears an unstable government couldn't withstand the Vietcong terrorism it would expect in retaliation, let alone resist the direct Chinese intervention such a policy would risk.

Likewise, present anti-Communist plans can't succeed unless a viable government is formed in Saigon. The lagging pacification program is designed to slowly reclaim rural land from the Vietcong by military force, then secure government control by economic and social measures which will win peasant support. (Aid officials provide cut-rate rice seed and baby pigs, for example, while in theory the government cracks down on local corruption and usury.) But without a motivated administration, which no one claims the nation yet has, these programs continue in their mismanaged and half-hearted fashion.

Civilian Support Essential

So U.S. prestige rides on these efforts to create a reasonably effective and popular government, something this former French colony has never known. "The most important missing ingredient now is political stability and direction," says a high-ranking U.S. military officer. This officer and many of his colleagues once viewed Vietnam as a strictly military problem; they foresaw victory once the U.S. trained enough peasants to carry rifles and obey their staff sergeants. Now they've learned that nothing in this confusing, chaotic country is so simple, and that civilian support is an essential part of any conceivable winning effort.

But a closer look at Vietnamese politics, and such groups as the People's Revolutionary Force, reveals the complexities involved in achieving civilian unity and support. All agree forming a successful regime is difficult; many say it is impossible.

South Vietnam has more than 30, perhaps even 50, fractions which call themselves political parties. Most are tiny; few can claim 1,000 supporters. Statesmanship is rare, as many are motivated solely by their immediate personal interests. They distrust each other, spread false rumors and actively undermine each other's attempts to shape political developments. None has power enough to force its will on an administration, yet many can cause enough trouble to prevent rivals from doing so.

These parties are intertwined with various Catholic and Buddhist groups, as well as with economic interests. Some are merely fronts for others, assigned to discredit their sponsors' rivals. Others are pressure groups, seeking good jobs, graft and influence for their members. If nothing else, many can stage street demonstrations in major cities and thwart policies they oppose. These are seldom motivated by ideology; demonstrators cost 40 cents per day in Saigon, less elsewhere. Meantime, Vietcong agents have infiltrated most political groups, serving intelligence missions or trying to shape policies along lines that fit the Communists' convenience.

The People's Revolutionary Force illustrates many of these problems. Though many authorities consider it a well-meaning nationalist organization, few credit it with the competence needed to provide decisive leadership if it did gain a major governmental role.

The PRF is headed by Dr. Le Khac Quyen, the pudgy and apparently easy-going dean of Hue University's medical school. For six years he was active in the Communist Vietminh guerrilla organization, the movement which drove the French from Vietnam. There he was under the command of an old schoolmate from Hue's Quan Hoc high school, General Vo Nguyen Giap, who is today commander of North Vietnam's 225,000-man army and the brains behind the Vietcong struggle.

Critics allege such Communist contacts haven't ended. A Saigon newspaper recently "exposed" one of Dr. Quyen's associates at Hue Central Hospital as a high Communist agent; it claims this proves "Quyen is dealing directly with the Vietcong."

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